Behind the Scenes in French Plane Affair

BY ARTHUR KROCK

WASHINGTON, Feb. 20.—Enough has been divulged concerning the errand of the French aviation mission to establish these things: Ambassador Bullitt was the entrepreneur, and was less concerned about details than in seeing that the French Government got the planes it wanted; the President was not much more concerned about details, but the army and the Treasury objected firmly to certain aspects of the situation until scenes were eliminated, and the President directed them to cease firing against others. Even some of the most suspicious of Congressional critics have become persuaded that these are the facts. Senator Arthur, Vermont Republican, has gone so far as to say that the entire transaction was "not unneutral, not provocative to any other nation, not an impediment to our own procurement program and not in violation of the army's priority rights to the latest developments in planes."

Yet there remains some undisclosed background which should be unveiled because of the persistence of certain misconceptions of the affair. Among the misconceptions are that the President enforced his order to the various Departments by dispatching an informal message or "note"; that Secretary Morgenthau intruded the Treasury's civilian Procurement Division into a military picture out of a desire to use his office for anything that might be of advantage to the German Government and that the only reason the British plane purchase went off smoothly and is secret, while the French did not, was because of the crash of the Douglas bomber in California.

What Really Happened

Taking these matters in their listed order, this correspondent feels able to state the following things:

1. The President, after a White House meeting on Jan. 16 which included Ambassador Bullitt, Secretary Morgenthau, Under-Secretary Hanes, Assistant Secretary Edison, Secretary Woodring and Assistant Secretary Johnson, sent to those officials concerned a direct and formal order, not a chit. It is said this document has been withdrawn from the files. But it is known it contained the words "You are directed," and was signed by the President. Officials to whom it was sent were left with the simple alternative of doing what they were told or resigning; and in the instance of army officers refusal carried with it the prospect of court-martial.

2. The Treasury's Procurement Division took over chaperonage of the French mission in California and other details at the suggestion of the President, who informed the functioning group, in answer to a direct question, that he wanted every facility save credit furnished to the prospective purchaser and reminded him in the hearing of several that, after all, "France is our first line of defense."